

## Methodological Nationalism

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### Abstract

Methodological nationalism is when social scientists naturalize the state or nation as a unit of analysis in their research. That is, it is when scholars assume or imply that the territorial state or a national community are *a priori* entities, rather than socially-constructed concepts. There is no dedicated body of literature that analyzes methodological nationalism, but when explicitly engaged by geographers, it is critiqued for a number of overlapping reasons. First, geographers suggest that methodological nationalism is problematic because it theoretically misrepresents and depoliticizes the global production of space and spatial relations. Second, it is critiqued as a form of nationalism that simultaneously clouds objective analysis and provincializes academic inquiry by (re)entrenching state-contained academic disciplines.

**Keywords:** constructivism, geopolitics, nation, nationalism, political geography, statism, state, state system, territorial trap, territory, world systems theory

Methodological nationalism is when social scientists naturalize the state or nation as a unit of analysis in their research. That is, it is when scholars assume, often implicitly, that the territorial state or a national community are *a priori* entities, rather than socially-constructed concepts. For example, in a methodologically nationalist study, states are imagined to be self-contained blocs of space, which might be lined up as congruent units to serve as variables in comparative analysis – qualitative and quantitative alike. This approach is perhaps most visible in current political science research, when scholars treat countries as a variable in a regression analysis, which might be used to understand divergent regime type trajectories, the use and impact of certain environmental policies, or social welfare outcomes. In studies such as these, states as diverse as the United Kingdom, Russia, Singapore, and Angola are treated as equivalent units of analysis – despite substantial disparities in terms of their most basic attributes, such as physical extent and population size, to say nothing of their historical, cultural, and political differences.

Within geography and related fields, there is no dedicated body of literature that analyzes methodological nationalism. Rather, the concept is most often touched on briefly, perhaps as a justification for a researcher's theoretical and methodological tack, or as a critique of other approaches. It is fair to say that, when referenced, methodological nationalism is uniformly framed as problematic. There is no discussion among geographers about whether it is justifiable. Those who use the term do so with a clear understanding that the "state" and the "nation" are socially constructed and, for them, there is no debating this stance. The opposing view – one in which methodological nationalism is not conceptualized as problematic – is not openly articulated as such; it is simply identifiable by the silent assumptions that scholars build into their research methods and political geographic imaginaries about the state and the nation as things-in-the-world. Because this silence reflects the failure to "see" methodological nationalism, this short review will be necessarily one-sided, outlining the arguments made by scholars that *do* see it – and that see it as a problem.

Methodological nationalism, when explicitly engaged by geographers, is critiqued for a number of overlapping reasons coalescing around two general themes. First, geographers suggest that methodological nationalism is problematic because it theoretically misrepresents and depoliticizes the global production of space. Second, it is critiqued as a form of nationalism that simultaneously clouds objective analysis and provincializes academic inquiry by (re)entrenching state-contained academic disciplines.

### **Misrepresenting and depoliticizing global space**

At the broadest theoretical level, geographers problematize methodological nationalism because it represents a static or essentialist understanding of global space, rather than one that recognizes that space and spatial imaginaries are socially constructed. Given the prevailing consensus within geography that all geographic concepts must be understood as socially constructed, contemporary geographers consistently push against approaches that pretend to unproblematically map a world made up of *a priori* objects or processes. This constructivist approach has diverse origins, although it has largely entered political geography, the subfield most explicitly concerned with theorizing the related concepts of the state and the nation, through the work of scholars informed by poststructuralist theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

For example, John Agnew and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, working together at Syracuse University in the 1980s, became key advocates of applying the insights of Foucauldian analyses of discourse and power/knowledge to the concepts of the state, nation, territory, and geopolitics – as were other leading political geographers Robert Sack, Alexander Murphy, Anssi Paasi. All have made important contributions to the field in their effort to denaturalize these political geographic concepts, although the largest impact in terms of what this theoretical approach means for research methods has been with Agnew's 1994 article, "The territorial trap." In this piece, Agnew critiques essentialist treatments of the state, which position it as a natural unit of world politics exercising exclusive power within a defined territory. He argues that the image of a free-standing state as a unit of analysis is problematic because states and territories are never simple blocks of space, but a web of relationships between geographic imaginaries and social practices at local, regional, and national levels.

Agnew and others have argued that there can be no abstract "state," which might be defined for comparative analysis and plugged into an equation. All states are constantly changing and, even though international geopolitical frameworks might suggest otherwise, individual states are not equivalent to one another. Instead, Agnew suggests that a particular state can only be understood by historicizing it. It is important to note that, while the territorial trap critique may seem like a strawman argument to many geographers today (*who would actually argue otherwise?*), Agnew's article was written as an enjoinder to scholars in political science and international relations – many of whom even now continue to treat states as comparable units of analysis.

Indeed, the image of states and territories as simple "blocks of space" is perhaps the dominant way of conceptualizing global space among laypeople around the world. This abstract understanding of space, geographers have long shown, reflects a modernist vision rooted in Renaissance conceptions of perspective, in which an abstract observer is visually and conceptually detached from the world and imagined to have an "objective" view on space. The resulting "bird's-eye view" of the world is so

pervasive that most people take it for granted – and as critics of methodological nationalism point out, it can easily creep into academic research design. Theoretically, modernist conceptions of space are problematic because they misrepresent or, more often, completely erase the politics of how space is *produced, narrated, and contested*. Constructivist views, by contrast, underscore the fact that no act of seeing or apprehending the world can be neutral and thus, no act of narrating geography can be apolitical. The fault that geographers and others find with methodological nationalism is thus largely tied its depoliticizing effect – an effect that ultimately serves to entrench uneven power relations rather than calling them into question.

If methodological nationalism is understood to be problematic because it theoretically misrepresents and depoliticizes the global production of space, then how have geographers sought to overcome its shortcomings? Within political geography, solutions have been found in many contrasting, and sometimes synergistic, approaches but falling into two general camps. First, some scholars have adopted a (neo-)Marxist tack that stresses transhistorical categories and sites of analysis, such as capital and labor relations, and focuses on capitalism as a global system. Theoretical inspiration here comes from diverse sources, which might include directly engaging with the work of Karl Marx or Antonio Gramsci, as well as the derivative frameworks like Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory.

Wallerstein's critical stance on the social sciences' overemphasis on "grand events" and "great men" also entailed rejecting analyses of a "society" defined by state boundaries. Doing so, he argued, required scholars to "unthink" the statist trappings of nineteenth-century social science. For him, this meant adopting *longue durée* analyses and focusing on broad, global structures. World systems theory has largely fallen out of favor today, with only one major political geography textbook still employing it as the overarching framework (*Political Geography: World-Economy, Nation-State, and Locality*, first published by Peter Taylor alone in 1985 and most recently in 2018 with Colin Flint as the lead co-author in its 7th edition). Nonetheless, like the similarly global frames of Marxist theory, world systems theory marked an important way around the problems of methodological nationalism and the territorial trap for many geographers in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Second, geographers working against the problems of methodological nationalism have otherwise found inspiration in various strands of poststructuralist and feminist theory, as well as network-centered analyses such as actor-network theory. This tack is popular among scholars who are suspicious the global style of analysis promoted by Marxist or world-system theorists, and who embrace a more grounded style of research that pays close attention to the positionality and agency of specific actors. Human geography's growing acceptance of ethnographic research methods since the 1990s is, in many ways, a response to the theoretical challenges of methodological nationalism. Recognizing the need to do more than just bypass reified concepts like the state, nation, or society, geographers have sought to actively deconstruct them through bottom-up analyses that trace the diverse actors, materialities, flows, and practices that give them the impression of unitary things-in-the-world.

Political geographers Agnew and Merje Kuus, for example, have argued that an alternate approach to the methodologically nationalist way of studying the state as an *autonomous subject* would be to instead approach it as a set of processes of *subject-making*, defined through policies operating under its name. This shift to decenter the state as an object of analysis and move to

examining the practices of “state-making” has deep roots, but it is largely influenced by the interdisciplinary body of research on “governmentality” – a concept introduced by Michel Foucault in his 1978 lectures at the Collège De France. More generally, though, practice-, network-, and materiality-focused frameworks are ultimately one way that geographers have sought to circumvent the blindness of methodological nationalism.

### **Entrenching statist thinking and nationalizing social science inquiry**

The second major theme in geographic critiques of methodological nationalism have centered on its problematic role in social science research – namely that, as a form of nationalism, it both clouds objective analysis and provincializes academic inquiry by entrenching statist thinking. Nationalism is an ideological doctrine that insists that national and political “units” should be congruent. This is best represented in the “nation-state” term, which political geographers reject for its role in naturalizing this conflation of two concepts that are actually related to one another in deeply contested ways. In this respect, nationalism is a normative discourse because it is proscriptive: it concerns a highly contested understanding of how the nation and the state should relate to one another.

Contemporary nationalism scholars have thus emphasized the importance of finding ways to step outside of a normative understanding of it by instead investigating how specific actors harness the discursive (rhetorical and material) opportunities that nationalism affords. This task can be tricky, however, because of what Anssi Paasi has termed “spatial socialization” – the set of processes and geographic imaginaries that socialize people to understand themselves as members of a spatially-defined entity, such as a territorial state. Michael Billig describes the methodological implications of this sort of spatial socialization as *sociological forgetting*, which is when “our” nationalism is forgotten. That is, when we think we see our research in more or less objective terms even though our analysis is in fact clouded or distorted by nationalistically-defined cognitive frames.

While there is no easy solution to this problem – claims to being all seeing and knowing are invariably partial and perspectival – those critiquing methodological nationalism stress that, at the bare minimum, scholars must recognize the social construction of the state and the nation. When they fail to do so, the pernicious conflation of the “nation-state” and nationalist ideology can easily creep into one’s research. This is seen as a problem for the theoretical problems outlined above, but also because it (re)entrenches deeply political moral maps of the world as divided into states and national communities. The simple act of conducting research in which the state and the nation are engaged as neutral objects of analysis reinforces an uneven global order, which is fundamentally built upon the false impression of their being “natural” and thus, removed from the realm of politics. As Billig argues in *Banal Nationalism*, nationalism is the ideology that makes a world divided into nations and territorial states seem “natural” – as if the world map could not be divided otherwise. Critics of methodological nationalism suggest, however, that this global imaginary is firmly situated in the realm of politics – not just in the abstract but also in terms of the practical conduct of our research.

Since critical geographers began to explicitly engage with questions about the politics of knowing, influenced primarily through feminist and poststructuralist theory in the late 1980s, the discipline has seen an important transformation in research design and methodological literatures that stress the positionality of ourselves and our role as scholars. This is important because it means

that researchers are all subject to the same forces of spatial socialization or sociological forgetting that underpin methodological nationalism. Yet, even where individual scholars are reflexive and seek to remove their nationalist lenses in conducting their research, some political geographers have shown that methodological nationalism can persist in the structures of academic disciplines themselves. As noted above, Immanuel Wallerstein was influential in geography for his call for scholars to “unthink” the statist trappings of social science. His work was a direct challenge to methodological nationalism insofar as it rejected the utility of state-centered research methods, but his broader project was to show that this was not just built into theoretical models but also academic practice itself.

Peter Taylor builds on this argument in a 1996 article on “embedded statism.” Going further than Agnew’s territorial trap critique, Taylor suggests that rather than simply being a problem of research design of international relations scholars or others, statist thinking is embedded in academia through the very structuring of academic disciplines. The social sciences went through their most intensive institutionalization during the same period in the late 1800s, when nationalist ideology and the ascendant concept of the “nation-state” were on the rise. This, Taylor and others have argued, has led to state-contained academic disciplines and the nationalization of social science inquiry “in the service of” the nation. Because of the nationalist division of academia, organized as it is around various state-defined research institutions, funding agencies, state-backed universities, and national disciplinary associations (such as the American Association of Geographers), scholars find themselves reproducing the state and the nation in their ordinary practices of writing grants, teaching, and otherwise position themselves and their labor as “relevant.”

Taylor’s discussion of embedded statism underscores how the prevailing attitude toward methodological nationalism is that it is provincializing and deeply problematic: for him, it narrows our understanding of the world and runs counter to major transformations underway in the era of globalization. Jouni Häkli has likewise shown how state-defined academic institutions and practices might not openly support a state’s nationalist policies, but that they nonetheless reinforce the hegemonic role of state territoriality in structuring the production of knowledge and social relations. In short, even when scholars believe they are not taking the state or the nation for granted, their research may still effect a form of methodological nationalism through participating in the state-dominated organization of academic research.

## **Conclusion**

Methodological nationalism assumes that the nationalizing state is a natural or neutral unit of analysis in the social sciences. It involves taking for granted the associated concepts of the territorial state and the nation, which is imagined to belong to a particular territory, as reflected in the problematic notion of the “nation-state.” The writing on methodological nationalism is one-sided in that it is only discussed by those that “see” it. This is not to say, however, that those who recognize it as a problem are always capable of erasing it from their work. In part, this is due to the institutional dilemmas related to the statist organization of academia. It is also a challenge because scholars are part of a world where the nationalist ways of perceiving global space are pervasive and naturalized. Even where scholars seek to step outside of their own experiences of spatial socialization, nationalism so permeates our most banal practices and cognitive frames that it is easy to see how it may filter into our research design, questions, attitudes, and biases.

In defining methodological nationalism as a challenge, geographers have never argued for some clear solution. As with the literature on positionality in conducting research, which demands that a significant degree of self-reflexivity be applied to all research practices, geographers are not always good at it. The broad consensus, however, is that it is nonetheless important to make a concerted effort to do so. For the issue of methodological nationalism, that means simply acknowledging that the state and the nation are not *a priori* objects in the world, but social constructions that demand a political lens to engage and to understand.

## Glossary

**Geographic/spatial imaginaries** The wide-ranging mental maps that define how individuals think about space, spatial relations, and geography.

**Governmentality** The term developed by theorist Michel Foucault to describe the practices, mentalities, and rationalities, through which individuals are governed and govern themselves.

**Nationalism** A political and normative discourse that posits a group's unique identity as a "nation" around its origins in a particular place and/or through kinship ties.

**Sociological forgetting** When social scientists overlook their own interpretive or ideological frames in analysing phenomena among "other" groups.

**Statist thinking** Thinking about the world as "naturally" divided into territorial states, and as every individual "belonging" to a particular state as a citizen.

**Territorial trap** A critique by political geographer John Agnew, which shows how statist thinking is fallacious and obscures key questions in international relations .

## Further Reading

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#### **Cross-References**

Borders  
 Discourse  
 Geopolitics  
 Nation  
 Nationalism, Historical Geography of  
 Maps and the State  
 Poststructuralism  
 State  
 Territory  
 Territoriality

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